



Statement by

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to the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva

on behalf of the De-alerting Group

at the

3rd Preparatory Committee of 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the
Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

General Debate

New York, 30 April 2018

Mr Chairman,

I have the honour of taking the floor on behalf of the De-alerting Group – Chile, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sweden, Switzerland and my own country, New Zealand – on the issue of decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems (or de-alerting).

This issue is not new – it has been under discussion in a number of international fora, including the NPT and the UNGA, for many years. Since its establishment in 2007, the De-alerting Group has repeatedly called for the de-alerting of nuclear weapon systems – both as a risk reduction measure and as a concrete step toward nuclear disarmament.

The De-alerting Group believes that as long as nuclear weapons exist, nuclear risks will remain significantly high. It is well known that these risks are multiplied considerably when nuclear weapons are on high alert – risks such as inadvertent launches due to technical failure or operator error; the possibility of misinterpretation of early warning data; failures of, and false reports by, early warning systems; and the possible use of nuclear weapons by unauthorised actors such as rogue military units, terrorists or cyber-attackers. It is also widely acknowledged, including by former military leaders from those States with the largest nuclear arsenals, that de-alerting is of most value during times of heightened tensions – times such as now. Against this backdrop, the case for urgent action on de-alerting should be compelling.

This is not just a theoretical concern but one substantiated by the significant history of accidents and close calls, particularly on the part of those in possession of the largest nuclear arsenals. Over the past decades, both the US and Russia have received erroneous information from early warning systems or have misinterpreted warning data. There have been other similar accidents. In each case

we have been extraordinarily fortunate that disaster has been averted. But given the devastating consequences of even the accidental use of nuclear weapons, it is not sufficient to have to continue our reliance on good fortune.

Mr Chair,

We regret that some nuclear weapon States seem to have moved away from their earlier acknowledgement of the risks of having nuclear forces on high alert, and have instead sought to assert that de-alerting could create “dangerous deterrence instabilities” and lead to a “rush to re-alert in a crisis or conflict”.

Any effort to defend and promote the retention of nuclear weapons on high-alert status would reflect a shift away from existing commitments to reduce the role of these weapons in security doctrines; to recognise the legitimate interest of non-nuclear weapon States in further reducing the operational status of these systems; and to take concrete agreed measures to de-alert. At this time of heightened international tension, stability would best be served by moving forward on these undertakings.

We agree with the Secretary-General’s view, presented in his Agenda for Disarmament, that reducing the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems is an issue, inter alia, on which nuclear weapon States should indeed be able to make progress in the face of strong international support for this - something again illustrated by the voting record on the resolution run by the De-alerting Group at the UNGA last year. A significant number of states continue to co-sponsor the resolution, among them states covered by extended nuclear deterrence.

Our Group has once again submitted a working paper to this year’s PrepCom (NPT/CONF.2020/PC.III/WP.23). Our paper highlights the consideration given the issue of de-alerting at previous Review

Conferences including as part of the 13 practical steps of 2000 and pursuant to Action 5 (e) of the 2010 Action Plan.

The De-alerting Group calls for agreement at the 2020 Review Conference on concrete measures for the next review cycle and in this regard makes three specific recommendations in the context of the implementation of Article VI - notably the taking of steps to comprehensively address the *significant risks* relating to high alert levels (including through confidence-building measures) as well as the taking of steps – unilaterally, bilaterally or otherwise – to rapidly *reduce operational readiness*. We call, too, for the provision of regular, standardised and comprehensive reports on this issue during the 2020 – 2025 review cycle.

We welcome that other groupings here are similarly giving thought to ways to carry the de-alerting issue forward - and the importance of doing so. Our message today is more crucial than ever. Nuclear weapon States must urgently implement previously agreed commitments on de-alerting and take steps to rapidly reduce operational readiness with a view to ensuring that all nuclear weapons are removed from high alert status.

The De-alerting Group remains fully committed to the NPT and looks forward to engaging with all States Parties to reinforce and strengthen the Treaty including via measures on this important topic.

Thank you Mr Chair.